DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 390 472 JC 960 051

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TITLE Rejuvenating Instruction through Development of an Applied Lab for Sociology Students.
PUB DATE Feb 94
NOTE 6p.; In: Proceedings of the National Conference on Successful College Teaching (18th, Orlando, Florida, February 26-28, 1994); see JC 960 033.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audiovisual Centers; Community Colleges; *Computer Assisted Instruction; *Educational Objectives; Educational Technology; *Learner Controlled Instruction; *Learning Laboratories; Program Design; Sociology; Two Year Colleges
IDENTIFIERS Sinclair Community College OH

ABSTRACT

The Center for Applied Social Issues (CASI), at Ohio's Sinclair Community College, is an interactive environment for sociology students, providing hands-on, course-integrated opportunities for learning sociological principles. Opened in fall 1992, CASI consists of computer applications, audio-visual aids, and table-top activities that extend classroom knowledge, reinforce basic knowledge, foster critical thinking, and permit exploration of advanced ideas. The CASI lab is open days and evenings, as well as a few hours on Saturdays, and is continually staffed by students who have completed the college's introductory sociology sequence with superior grades. One year after opening, faculty at the college had developed 106 activities for CASI, while the Center is in the process of obtaining multimedia workstations and laserdisk activities and developing multimedia presentations that will reinforce and enhance classroom materials. Approximately 27 students can be accommodated at one time, with 50 to 88 students typically using the lab for the 45-hour per week that CASI is open. All activities are self-paced and allow students to repeat as necessary, while instructors generally use CASI to assign required or provide extra-credit activities. Students pay no fees to use the lab, with the CASI budget combined with budgets of other Liberal Arts and Sciences labs and administered by a coordinator. Five hours of release time each quarter are granted to the faculty member who administers the lab, hires and supervises student workers, administers an evaluation, and plans the budget. (BCY)

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Paper included in the Proceedings of the Eighteenth National Conference on Successful College Teaching (Orlando, FL, February 26-28, 1994)

JC 960 051

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REJUVENATING INSTRUCTION THROUGH DEVELOPMENT OF AN APPLIED LAB FOR SOCIOLOGY STUDENTS

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Abstract

Faculty and students have experienced a rejuvenation of enthusiasm in the sociology courses through their experiences in CASI. CASI, The Center of Applied Social Issues, consists of computer applications, audio-visual, and tabletop activities which extends classroom knowledge, reinforces basic knowledge, fosters critical thinking, and permits exploration of advanced ideas. CASI currently contains over 90 different activities which faculty have authored or adapted.

Introduction

CASI, The Center for Applied Social Issues, is an interactive environment for sociology students at Sinclair Community College in Dayton, Ohio. CASI is a unique forum for the engagement of the educational process because it provides opportunities for students to actively be a partner in learning sociological principles. CASI provides hands-on, course-integrated opportunities for students enrolled in all of our sociology course offerings.

The areas of experiential and nontraditional learning challenges all educators today. Students come to us with an array of learning styles, experiences, academic and career goals, abilities, and level of competencies. All of these are furthered by what they actively do. Engaging students as active participants in their learning process so that they can take a leading role in their education has been a long desired outcome of sociological education. The Sociology Department at Sinclair Community College has listened carefully to students and the experts who guide sociological education and created CASI as a vehicle to successfully meet all the learning needs of freshman and sophomore students. A participatory experience is designed which engages students beyond the traditional classroom format so that all students, regardless of their backgrounds, abilities, competencies, or goals can practice sociology.

Sociology is a science, using the scientific method. Because students retain new knowledge best by discovery and participation, a vehicle to foster the process of learning, using, and applying science needed to be part of a sociology student's beginning experiences. CASI is the means by which we empower students and faculty with the opportunities to take part in the process of engagement, participation, and application of science. CASI provides students of every major with the benefit of increased involvement with the subject matter of sociology which they will use all during their work and personal lives. Faculty have an opportunity to expand their skills and abilities by participation in CASI Activities.

History of CASI

In March of 1990 Dr. Steven Steele and Dr. Joseph Lamp from the Center for the Study of Local Issues at Anne Arundel Community College came to sinclair to give a seminar entitled, "The Teaching of Sociological Applications to Undergraduates and Selling it to the Administration. Dr.'s Steele and Lamp were selected because they have had close to a decade of successful experience with freshman and sophomore students carrying out research at their community college. After the conference, we determined that having a research opportunity for students combined with that of an interactive lab would be the kind of learning experience we desired at Sinclair for the student population.

Interactive, hands-on lab experiences have a history at Sinclair. The Psychology Department has a Demonstration Lab, the English Department has a Writing Center, the Physics Department developed a lab, and the Math Department has a Learning Lab. Other community colleges across the country have freshmen and sophomore students doing applied sociological research successfully and it was our desire to combine an interactive lab with student-driven research.

In the Spring of 1990 we submitted the proposal for CASI to the Liberal Arts and Sciences dean. The Dean was very supportive and he guided the proposal through the administrative bureaucracy so that the proposal was approved and funded. The writers then set about during the Fall and Winter quarters of 1990-91 ordering and receiving the necessary hardware, software, furniture, storage, and other items we necessary to operate. The Dean found a room and the authors met with the College's interior designer to satisfy architectural requirements.

Unexpectedly, Sinclair's Provost decided that the student-driven research aspect of CASI would not go forward, and the permission to implement this component of CASI was halted. However, plans continued to develop an interactive lab and opened the Fall of 1992.

One year after opening 106 Activities have been developed by faculty which span video, computer, audio, and tabletop experiences. Also, the writers are in the process of obtaining multimedia work stations, laserdisk Activities, and developing multimedia presentations which will reinforce and enhance classroom materials. At present, CASI is not large enough to accommodate an entire class of thirty students at one time, but usually an upper limit of approximately twenty-seven students has been set to work on a variety of Activities using CASI at any one time. The writer's typically average fifty to eight-eight students for the forty-five hours per week that CASI is open. Saturday hours and two evenings are included to reach students who are enrolled exclusively in evenings courses or who have hectic work and class schedules and can come only on Saturdays.

For the convenience of full and part-time instructors, the authors maintain a CASI Faculty Handbook which contains information about the functioning of CASI and the rules for operation. Files are kept of existing Activities in the Departmental office so that instructors can check on newly developed Activities or on specific Activities that fit with individual needs. Each Activity has been annotated so that a listing is available within CASI for students with appropriate color coding so students know which Activities correspond to a given course. This descriptive listing also is available within the Departmental office for ease of access of instructors.

What CASI Does for the Student

CASI functions to provide students with a guided forum for personal discovery as they learn basic sociology. Students are able to move at their own pace and repeat the acquisition of new information as often as necessary. CASI has been designed to permit students to supplement their classroom instruction, to explore issues and ideas that time does not permit within the classroom, and to further the mission of Sinclair Community College.

The objectives CASI meets for students includes:

1. To enhance student computer experiences through use and application of actual data bases and simulations.
2. To prepare students for the changing expectations of local four-year universities.
3. To allow students the opportunity to apply classroom gained skills to computer simulations and other activities.
4. To foster and reinforce critical thinking and writing skills.
5. To extend classroom knowledge through application and analysis of current social issues and social problems.
6. To permit students to practice basic research skills through simulations and guided exercises.
7. To have students apply theories to a variety of social situations which they might encounter in professional or personal capacities.
8. To reinforce global awareness on the part of every sociology students.

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9. To enable students of varying learning styles a forum within which they can add to their understanding of sociology.

The variety of Activities currently in place affords students considerable choice in directing their learning. All Activities are self-paced and students may return to work on a given Activity if more time is needed than was anticipated. The authors particularly wanted students to be able to take a proactive, positive approach to the Activities offered so that students with diverse backgrounds, interests, strengths, experiences, and abilities could move through sociology in a manner designed to challenge, excite, and strengthen. As a result, the writers feel confident that the students learn by being active participants in the process of acquiring a sociological education. Students practice, repeat, explore, investigate, and learn sociology through as many interactive mediums as we can provide. A concerted effort has been made to foster an environment which is challenging without being threatening. Students objectives were composed with the assumption that the most fragile student could take the course and be offered a meaningful and involved educational experience.

What CASI Does for the Instructor

Instructors who use CASI have been impressed with the excitement students have for the subject matter of sociology. Students initiate more questions which are reflective of critical thought than they have before and we have noticed that they bring a greater depth of understanding to their classes. In turn, instructors have been extremely pleased by the positive experiences students continually have within CASI. Instructors now are able to better realize departmental outcomes and the college mission by exposing students to situations and media that are unavailable or unmanageable within a classroom setting. Because some of the reinforcement and repetition of material is available in CASI, instructors have found that they are free to concentrate on additional information that prior to the opening of CASI was beyond the limits of our eleven week quarter. With instructional time saved, additional avenues of creativity have been opened within the classroom as students come to classes with greater depths of understanding. The excitement of the lab is reflected in the atmosphere of the class.

Instructors have commented that they are thrust into the role of "coach" or "guide" rather than that of an authority who is present to spout the "truth" of sociology. This is an ideal role for the instructors who are interested in students assuming responsibility for their educational process. The authors have an increased ability to work individually with students as they move through their assignments which has delighted both students and faculty.

Additionally, instructors who wish to develop Activities around particular themes, theories, methodologies, skills, or issues are encouraged to do so. In the process, syllabi have been reconstructed, courses have been rethought, and we have had the opportunity to be as creative as our technology will permit us to be in the development of new opportunities in CASI.

How CASI Operates

Since it is the intent of the authors to make CASI as accessible as possible to students who often hurry off campus to jobs and families, the lab is open during the day, evenings, and for a few hours on Saturdays. If the College moves toward course offerings on Sundays, the schedule will be adjusted to meet the needs of students who may be commuting to Sinclair for those classes.

CASI is continually staffed by student workers who have completed the introductory sequence with superior grades and who then undergo an interview. It is important for the image the authors wish to create via CASI that student workers understand and appreciate the professional, supportive atmosphere desired. As a result, professional dress and demeanor are stressed during the interview. Also shared are the expectations for the various record-keeping duties the lab entails and the requirements that all student workers complete each Activity that is available. If a student believes that s/he can effectively represent the Sociology Department and expresses a willingness to assist students, the paperwork is processed for student employment. Each student worker attends an orientation and engages in role playing to better prepare for a variety of situations which may arise in running the lab. The students hired to date, have been remarkably responsible and responsive to CASI. They have handled delicate situations with sensitivity and maturity and, in turn, we support their efforts with guidance and encouragement. Indeed, faculty

have been able to mentor potential majors and have developed close relationships with our student workers. Much of the success enjoyed with CASI has been due to their smooth handling of the day-to-day functions of the lab.

When a student enters CASI, s/he fills out a form which provides information to track lab usage and serves as a mechanism for regulating the flow of students in and out of the room. All students must furnish a student identification card with a current validation sticker. Students select the Activity they desire by reading a wall chart which contains an annotated listing of all Activities with colored designations which refer to specific courses. Unless an instructor specifically has required a particular Activity, students then can question the CASI Assistant (student worker) further about individual Activities. The CASI Assistant furnishes the Activity, provides any charts or reading materials, and assists the student with any explanations needed about equipment use.

Provided are a dictionary, wall charts indicating basic rules for using the facility, the parameters of the sociological perspective, and the opportunity to return at a later time if the Activity does not get completed. Students are on their own for answering questions within Activities, although the CASI Assistant will assist with some very basic content questions.

When a student completes an Activity, it is returned to the CASI Assistant who records the time of completion. At the close of the lab for the day, Activities are sorted according to instructor name and distributed to individual instructor mailboxes. A copy of the student's sign-in sheet is attached to each student's completed Activity.

There are a variety of ways instructors use CASI. Primarily, instructors have been using the lab for required or extra credit Activities in the following courses:

*Introductory Sociology
*Social Problems
*Criminology
*Juvenile Delinquency
*Cultural Anthropology
*Race and Ethnic Relations
*Human Sexuality
*Introduction to Social Welfare
*Marriage and the Family

Instructors may require a minimum number of Activities for students to complete within a given quarter, offer students extra credit for a set amount of participation, or invite students to visit the facility to explore an area of interest. Typically, students return to CASI because they are interested in the interactive component of learning sociology; indeed, students complete Activities even when there is no course credit to be had.

No student pays lab fees to use CASI. The budget for the lab initially was combined with other Liberal Arts and Sciences labs and administered by a coordinator. When that position was eliminated, budgeting reverted to individual departments. Five hours release time each quarter is granted to the faculty member who administers the lab, hires and supervises student workers, administers an evaluation, and plans the budget. Faculty develop new Activities because of their interest in the facility and instruction. Computers, video equipment, storage, and other materials have also been added as needed.

An important aspect of budgeting for CASI involves the development of the Center so that we can continue to keep abreast of the release of new software programs or the marketing of new equipment. New techniques or technologies are incorporated so that students can be provided with a state-of-the-art facility. As a result, CASI is involved in a continuous process of revision of Activities, plans for future trends, and development of resources.